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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study seeks to explain variation in conflict and ambiguity among a national sample of directors of school district research and evaluation units. The approach developed argues that variation in evaluation unit directors' role conflict and ambiguity is a function of both school district and evaluation unit characteristics, since both sets of organizational features influence the political/economic context within which the director must function. It is also argued that the social resource characteristics of the school district, that is, the external context within which evaluation units function, and the organization of the unit itself, are key sources of information about them, and particularly about the amount of conflict and ambiguity confronted by the directors. (Author/GK)

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STUDIES IN EVALUATION AND DECISION MAKING

Work Unit 1:

Faculty Papers Dealing With School District Research, Development and Evaluation Units

Richard C. Williams
Project Director

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CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AFFECTING ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY: A STUDY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT EVALUATION UNIT HEADS

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CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AFFECTING ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY. A STUDY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT EVALUATION UNIT HEADS[1]

(c)

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CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AFFECTING ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY: A STUDY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT EVALUATION UNIT HEADS

Increasingly, organizational theorists are recognizing the significance of environmental factors on organizations. Perrow (1979) has referred to this emphasis as a "new wave-gathering force." Contingency, resource dependence, ecological, political economy, and open system theorists (Hall, 1977; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Aldrich, 1979; Zald, 1969; Katz and Kahn, 1966) all emphasize in one form or another the impact of the environment on the focal organization. This focus is particularly important to the understanding of leader behavior in newly-created boundary-spanning organizations (Aldrich and Herker, 1977). The research evidence suggests that boundary-spanners experience high levels of role conflict (Organ, 1971 and 1976; Organ and Green, 1972; Adams, 1976; Miles, 1976). The evidence is less conclusive regarding the relationship between boundary-spanning and role ambiguity. The most systematic study of ambiguity is that of March and Olsen (1976). March and his colleagues not only see ambiguity as closely linked to the choice process but, in addition, assert that it is endemic to public and educational organizations (Cohen and March, 1974). In a recent review of role conflict research Whetten (1978) observed that " . . . what is significant about the literature on boundary spanning is the noticeable lack of interest in systematically exploring the sources of role conflict." With the exception of the March and Olsen the same could be said about research on role ambiguity.[2]

School district research and evaluation unit heads face complex administrative problems. Their organizations are typically both new and small. The resources they have available, in part because of their newness and size (which makes competition with other units difficult), are scarce. At the same time, the demands placed upon them by powerful persons and organizations in their environment are extensive and growing. Federal, state, county, and other school units increasingly require information from school districts concerning the effectiveness of program functioning in specified areas.[3] The pivotal position of research and evaluation unit heads as collectors and controllers of this information makes their position, particularly in desegregation cases, increasingly controversial and politically relevant. Since the field of evaluation research has emerged recently, the background and training of unit directors is frequently in other areas. This combination--minimal job training, increasing service demand, inadequate resources, and politically controversial issues--provide all the ingredients necessary for deep-seated role conflict and ambiguity.

This exploratory study seeks to explain variation in conflict and ambiguity among a national sample of directors of school district research and evaluation units. The approach developed argues that variation in evaluation unit directors' role conflict and ambiguity is a function of both school district and evaluation unit characteristics since both sets of organizational features influence the political economic context within which the director must function.

APPROACH AND HYPOTHESES

Although role conflict and ambiguity are related (see Kahn et al., 1964), they are not identical. Conflict comes from the quality and quantity of demands placed on persons while ambiguity refers simply to perceived uncertainty. The relationship between these variables is largely unexplored. March and Olsen (1976) claim that "individuals find themselves in a more complex, less stable, and less understood world than that described by standard theories of organizational choice; they are placed in a world over which they often have only modest control" (p. 21). Ambiguity in educational organizations and especially among leaders in this type of social system is the name of the game. As for role conflict, the pioneer empirical study of the phenomenon by Gross, Mason, and McEachern (1958) was of school principals. Given the newness and instability of school evaluation units both phenomena should be extant in our sample.

Contrary to the standard portrait of schools as unsuccessful organizations, Meyer (1977) pictures them as highly successful because they have survived and even substantially expanded their resource base. The basis for their success is their conformity to society's institutionalized rules and the fact they have become "relatively decoupled from the technical work of instruction." Unlike business firms which carefully control their technical structures, schools leave the actual instructional tasks relatively unevaluated and uncontrolled. Since evaluation units are responsible for reviewing instructional programs, we might expect that evaluation unit directors face far more conflict and ambiguity than their counterparts in business firms.

Our approach emphasizes the preeminent affect of context or structure on the organizational subunit and thence on role conflict and ambiguity. Three school district variables influence the context within which evaluation units function: formalization, size, and heterogeneity.

Each of the variables affect the extent of interest group pressures likely to be experienced by the unit director. Formalization refers to rules. Its opposite is anomie. The more regulated the district organization the greater the unit's administrative control over uncertainty. Both district size and heterogeneity influence diversity of interest groups in the district.

The more formalized the organization the more protected the unit head feels (Gouldner, 1954; Miles and Perreault, 1976) and the less likely he experiences role conflict. Kahn et al.(1964) note that persons in positions that link units are more likely to be subjected to conflicting requirements and pressures because they interact with persons who have competing goals and standards. However, formalization should relieve some of this conflict insofar as rules closely specify task and goal responsibilities. District size and heterogeneity affect its political capabilities and its ability to capture resources from the society. Although, on the one hand, large size and heterogeneity demand respect and hence enable districts to command greater amounts of resources, on the other hand, they imply more competing interest groups. The greater the diversity of interest groups in a school district the more likely there will be conflict between them. Interest group conflict in the school district should lead to role conflict and ambiguity among evaluation unit heads.

The unit variables of concern are history and resource availability. The former was measured by length of time the unit has existed. Pfeffer (1979) suggests that survival is the ultimate test of organizational effectiveness, hence history is inextricably linked to that concept. The latter variable was measured specifically by budget and number of staff personnel. History and unit resources are substantially determined by decisions external to the focal unit. Pfeffer also proposed that persons have less effect on organizations than the institutional context because selection processes ensure homogeneity among leaders. Leaders are seen as having little discretion anyway since the major impact on outcomes stem from resource availability and, in school districts in particular, this is generally outside the unit head's control (Leiberson and O'Connor, 1972). Since a unit director's uncertainty mainly revolves around resources, we might have anticipated that unit variables would have a greater impact on ambiguity than on conflict.

Conflict. Roles are generally defined as sets of expectations about behavior associated with organizational positions. Role conflict takes place when a position occupant encounters inconsistent demands and expectations. Four types of role conflict have been identified by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970): "1. Conflict between the focal person's internal standards or values and the defined role behavior. . . 2. Conflict between the time, resources, or capabilities of the focal person and defined role behavior. . . 3. Conflict between several roles for the same person which require different incompatible behaviors. . . 4. Conflicting expectations and organizational demands in the form of incompatible policies, conflicting requests from others, and incompatible standards of evaluation."

Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman developed the factorially identifiable and independent measures of role conflict and ambiguity adapted for use in the present project. Six items with the highest factor loadings were selected from their larger set. The items, listed with per cent agreement in our sample, were, as follows:

Items	% Agree or Strongly Agree
I receive assignments without the manpower to complete them.	65%
I work under incompatible policies and quidelines.	21
I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.	20
I receive assignments without adequate resources and materials to execute them.	51
I have to do things that should be done differently.	53
I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.	27

It should be noted that over fifty per cent of the respondents selected the high role conflict response in three of the six items. Two of these three were concerned with inadequate resources.

Ambiguity. Role ambiguity refers to the situation that takes place when the occupant of a position lacks the appropriate role-related information. This occurs when the position is not clearly defined or when access to needed information is impeded, for example, because of the occupant's inexperience or because of the newness of the position in the organization. Specifically then, ambiguity refers to the degree of felt certainty regarding one's duties, authority, allocation of time, and goals. To measure ambiguity the five items with the highest factor loadings were selected from the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman set. The items listed with per cent

agreement in our sample were, as follows:

Items	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree
I feel certain about how much authority I have.	18%
I have clear, planned goals and objectives for my job.	12
I know that I have divided my time properly.	30
I know what my responsibilities are.	10
I know exactly what is expected of me.	20

It is apparent from the above that role ambiguity was less common among directors than conflict. The large proportion of the sample reported little ambiguity. Although we lack comparative data, these findings would seem to contradict March and Olsen's claim regarding the pervasiveness of ambiguity. Consistent with Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, we found a significant negative correlation between role conflict and ambiguity. ($r=-.19$, $p < .001$. See Table I.) It may be that conflict produces expectational clarity.

The respondents were selected through a two-stage process. First, letters were sent to all 750 school superintendents in districts with 10,000 or more students and to a 50% sample of the 573 school districts with 5,000-9,999 students. All of the larger districts and 81% of the smaller ones responded indicating whether or not their district had an evaluation unit. Next, in spring, 1978, a questionnaire was sent to all 336 large school districts (10,000 or more students) and to the 74 smaller ones identified as having evaluation units. A total of 263 unit heads or 64.1% returned the schedule.

The evaluation unit heads were typically highly experienced and professionally trained individuals. 65% held the doctorate, mostly in administration, elementary or secondary education, statistics, or educational or general psychology. Almost three out of ten had been school principals and over half were once elementary or secondary school teachers. Very few (14.4%) had had any formal course work in evaluation. No significant relationship was found between taking such courses and role conflict or ambiguity.

The main function of school district evaluation and research units is to provide information of value to school administrators. Most of these units report directly to the superintendent or through one intermediary. The job mainly involves carefully monitoring school programs and emphasizes testing student achievement.

School District Variables. Three variables were used: formalization, size, and heterogeneity. Hage and Aiken (1970) and Hall (1977) define formalization as the rules and procedures organizations establish to handle contingencies. We asked the unit heads to report the extent to which there were written school board policies in six areas: student conduct in classrooms, introduction of instructional innovations, type of curricular material to be used, student conduct on school grounds, instructional methods teachers use, and criteria used in evaluating student learning. This was consistent with Pugh et al.'s (1968) definition of formalization as "the extent to which rules, procedures, instructions, and communications are written." A factor analysis of the scale resulted in one factor that explained 39 per cent of the variance of the items. Average item-item correlation was .26. Cronbach's (1951) Alpha was .68 indicating replicability and re-

liability. The correlation matrix and factor loadings may be found in the Appendix.

School districts were classified by size into four groups: metropolitan districts (enrollment 45,000 or more); large districts (enrollment 25,000-44,999); medium districts (enrollment 10,000-24,999); and small districts (enrollment 5,000-9,999). Existence of an evaluation unit was naturally related to size. (Districts under 5,000 students were excluded from the study.)

Heterogeneity referred mainly to the ethnic-racial student mix in the district. The measure selected was per cent of students eligible for the nationwide free-lunch program. As Table I shows, this measure correlated significantly with per cent White, per cent Black, per cent Hispanic, and per cent students scoring in the bottom quartile.

Table 1 about here

Blau (1977) defines heterogeneity as "the distribution of a population among groups in terms of a nominal parameter" (p. 9). He lists thirteen nominal parameters: sex, race, religion, ethnic affiliation, clan, occupation, place of work, place of residence, industry, marital status, political affiliation, national origin, and language. The greater the number of groups and the more evenly a population is divided among them the greater the heterogeneity. The free-lunch program is based on willingness to participate. Using this measure as a heterogeneity index probably maximized the ethnic-racial mix, as well as the mix on religion, clan, marital status, national origin, and language. On the other hand, it may

well be associated with economic homogeneity. Unfortunately, data was unavailable to ascertain the association of the index with each of these variables.

Evaluation Unit Variables. History referred to the length of time the unit was in existence. As anticipated, most were new organizations. Over one-third (35%) were five years old or less while 62% were ten years of age or under. Only about one-seventh of the units (14%) had been in existence fifteen years or longer.

Two indexes of resources were used. Monetary resources were measured by the unit's percentage of the school district's yearly budget. In general, the larger the unit's per cent of the budget the greater the amount of slack resources. Personnel resources were determined by the number of fulltime staff in the unit. In 23 units only part-time staff were employed; in 108 there was only one fulltime employee; and 81 units ranged in size from 2-5 full-time persons. The largest unit reported 90 staff members. It may be assumed that the larger the staff the greater the personnel resources and the more slack.

A substantial correlation was found between role conflict and the director's feeling about the adequacy of his budget ($r=.42$, $p < .001$). Those with high conflict felt the budget was inadequate. Similarly, a positive correlation of almost the same magnitude was found between the director's perception of the adequacy of personnel resources and his level of role conflict ($r=.41$, $p < .001$).

RESULTS

In Table 2 the means, standard deviations, N's, and intercorrelations are presented for the principal variables used in the study. The findings show that the three district variables

were significantly related both to ambiguity and conflict while the unit variables correlated with ambiguity but not conflict.

Table 2 about here

Evaluation unit variables were history, budget, and staff size. A slight negative correlation was found between history and ambiguity. The longer the unit was in existence the less ambiguity was experienced by the director. A modest relationship was found between the two resource indexes and ambiguity. Budget and staff availability, which not surprisingly were positively correlated with one another, generate increased demands on the director. In March and Olsen's (1976) terms, slack provides solutions for problems and sufficient participants for each and every choice. The greater the unit's slack resources the more problems for the director and hence the greater his uncertainty as to how to resolve them.

No significant relationships were found between the three unit variables and role conflict. It could have been hypothesized that new units would produce more role conflict than old ones in that the former being less institutionalized would be less able to reconcile incompatible demands and pressures. Alternatively, one might argue the opposite; namely, that old units would experience greater role conflict since they have had more time to become known, would thereby generate more demands from external units, and hence experience more pressures than new units. Neither history nor slack engendered inconsistent demands and expectations for the director. It might have been anticipated that slack would increase the director's role conflict since demands increase when more resources are available. Insofar as these demands outrun resources conflict results. If resources are scarce, conflict would also be high. This model suggests that the relationship between slack and conflict is curvilinear.

The bivariate relationships between school district characteristics and the dependent variables were with one exception sta-

tistically significant. District size was related to role conflict but not to ambiguity. Kahn et al. (1964) also found a significant correlation between size and role conflict. Size has been related to structural elaboration (Meyer, 1972) and to subgoal development (Dearborn and Simon, 1958), both indexes of differentiation. Differentiation creates a lack of consensus which generates role conflict for the administrator.

Formalization was negatively related to role conflict. This may mean that rules act as intended in regulating expectations and enhancing consensus. However, formalization was positively related to ambiguity. The more rules the greater the director's uncertainty. This would obviously not be an intended function of rules. It may be that large numbers of rules and policies are so cumbersome and complex that they may induce uncertainty among heads of units.

Heterogeneity was the final context variable. Not surprisingly, it was significantly correlated with district size. This was reassuring since large metropolitan districts should be the most diverse and small ones least diverse. Heterogeneity was positively related to role conflict. This finding supports Thompson's (1960) theory which asserted that heterogeneity of organization members generates role diversity which causes organizational conflict. Organizations with heterogeneous populations develop numerous "latent roles" which present complex management problems. The same finding would be predicted by political economy and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; and Zald, 1969). The greater the heterogeneity of the district the more diverse and extensive are competing groups. The more such groups, all seeking to assert their interests, the more conflict experienced

by the unit head. His task is complicated under such circumstances as he seeks to reconcile demands for information from teachers, community groups, parents, the school board, and in the case of desegregation, the courts. Heterogeneity was also positively correlated with ambiguity. One explanation is that heterogeneity leads to increased needs for information input and for distribution of output. The greater in number of such demands the less certain the director is regarding his duties, authority, time allocation, and objectives. Hence, the greater his felt ambiguity.

The regression analyses were designed to tell us how much of the variance in conflict and ambiguity the complete set of independent variables explained. The regression equation used took the following basic form:

$$\text{Conflict} = a + b_1 (\text{School District Variables}) + b_2 (\text{Unit Variables}) + \text{Ambiguity} + \text{Error}$$

The independent variables were regressed in stepwise fashion first on conflict and then on ambiguity. The district variables were entered first since presumably they were less controllable by the directors than were the unit variables. Tables 3 and 4 present the main findings. The multiple R for the equations ranged

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Tables 3 and 4 here

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from .18 to .35 indicating that the independent variables accounted for only about 3% to 12% of the variance in conflict and ambiguity. Obviously, this was not a great deal. The more conservative adjusted R^2 measures which consider the number of variables in the equation reduced this amount further.

Use of Evaluation Unit Data. Respondents were asked to identify the major users of their units' reports. It was found that the consistent users were program directors (62%), superintendents (60%), central office staff (58%), and principals (52%). Only one-third reported teachers as consistent users. This was about the same percentage that reported federal and state agencies as users. Only 9% reported that parents or local citizen groups were consistent users. It was evident that the units service mainly the school administration.

As Table 5 demonstrates, conflict was negatively correlated with service use by superintendents and principals, that is, those who did not report these parties as consistent users were most likely to experience high conflict. This suggests that the closer the

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Table 5 about here

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service ties between the evaluation unit head and the school superintendent and principals the less conflict was experienced. A different pattern was found for ambiguity. Unit heads with high ambiguity were more likely to report superintendents, principals, program directors, board members, and federal agencies as consistent users of their services and less likely to report teachers and central office personnel as users. It appears that the greater the range of perceived use of evaluation services the more the felt ambiguity. Any type of administrative contact can generate uncertainty, but contact with those highly placed in the organization (such as superintendents, principals, board members) was associated with high ambiguity while contact with lower level roles (teachers,

program directors) was associated with low ambiguity.

CONCLUSION

Our approach to the study of evaluation units emphasized that these organizations emerged mainly from the needs of school districts. It was largely because of federal and state evaluation requirements that such units were formed in the first place. No group of persons necessarily planned or designed each individual evaluation unit. Instead we expect that they developed out of their daily activities. In the larger metropolitan districts evaluation tasks were probably simply added on to existing research unit activities. Although each unit developed a distinct character of its own, its history, the nature of the work that it does, and its emerging relationships to some extent were products of organizational features of the school district.

Juvenal wrote in his Satires, "But who is to guard the guardians themselves?" while Plato, much less the realist, stated in the Republic, "What an absurd idea--a guardian to need a guardian." Evaluation is a booming enterprize and evaluation units in school districts are not only forming rapidly but are steadily growing in size and resources. These units to some extent are the guardians, the data collectors and the assessors, and it therefore behooves the public to know more about their functioning. This paper argues that the social resource characteristics of the school district, that is, the external context within which evaluation units function, and the organization of the unit itself, are key sources of information about them and particularly about the amount of conflict and ambiguity confronted by the directors.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Data collection for this study was undertaken by the Center for the study of Evaluation, UCLA under the direction of Dr. Catherine Lyon. I am grateful for her assistance, and for the support, financial and otherwise, of the Center's staff, particularly Dr. Eva Baker and Dr. Adrianne Bank. This project was also partially supported by NIMH (MH-14583). I am most appreciative of the research assistance of Pamela Tolbert and the typing of Andrea Anzalone.

2. March and Olsen (1976) refer to four types of ambiguity: ,the ambiguity of attention, ambiguity of understanding, ambiguity of history, and the ambiguity of organization. The ambiguity measure we used doesn't begin to do justice to the richness of this typology.

3. For example, Stufflebean et al. (1971) write: "As a response to outside pressures, many school districts have installed or are now installing evaluation units" (p. 268, underlines added).

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TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS AMONG INDICATORS OF DISTRICT HETEROGENEITY

	Per Cent Black	Per Cent Hispanic	Bottom Quartile Students	Per Cent Free Lunch
Per Cent White	-.77**	-.47**	-.63**	-.76**
Per Cent Black		-.12**	.56**	.69**
Per Cent Hispanic			.27**	.25**
Bottom Quartile Students				.66**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .00$

Tests of significance are two-tailed.

TABLE 2.

MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, N'S, AND CORRELATIONS OF DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ambiguity	History	EV Budget	EV Staff	District Size	District Formalization	District Heterogeneit
Conflict	263	2.23	.69	-.19***	-.004	-.03	.07	.16***	-.08*	.12**
Ambiguity	263	2.96	.47	--	-.07*	.19***	.16**	.03	.10**	.13**
History	249	68.33	10.36	--	--	.16**	-.10**	-.16**	-.01	-.08*
EV Budget	223	33.83	42.68	--	--	--	.31***	.007	-.04	.06
EV Staff	262	4.77	9.94	--	--	--	--	.44***	-.03	.25***
District Size	263	2.51	.99	--	--	--	--	--	.002	.33***
District Formalization	263	1.95	.42	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.16**
District Heterogeneity	225	24.74	19.79	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

* p <.10

** p <.05

*** p <.001

Tests of significance are 2-tailed

Table 3

REGRESSION OF SCHOOL DISTRICT AND EVALUATION UNIT VARIABLES ON ROLE AMBIGUITY

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	Standardized Regression Coefficient
Heterogeneity	.306	.001	.132
Size	-.233	.038	-.051
Formalization	.158	.078	.144
History	-.308	.003	-.065
EU Budget	.155	.0008	.146
EU Staff	.454	.003	.105
Conflict	-.128	.048	-.192
(Constant)	3.067		
Multiple R	.350		
R Square	.122		
Adjusted R Square	.088		

Table 4

REGRESSION OF SCHOOL DISTRICT AND EVALUATION UNIT VARIABLES ON ROLE CONFLICT

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	Standardized Regression Coefficient
Heterogeneity	.366	.002	.105
Size	.138	.057	.200
Formalization	-.148	.120	-.090
History	.143	.005	.020
EU Budget	.161	.001	.0001
EU Staff	.948	.005	.014
Ambiguity	-.293	.111	-.194
(Constant)	2.888		
Multiple R	.337		
R Square	.113		
Adjusted R Square	.078		

Table 5

DISTRICT USE OF EVALUATION UNIT DATA AND ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY

Reported Consistent User	Role Conflict	Role Ambiguity
Superintendent	-.20 (p=.02)	.19 (p=.02)
Principals	-.18 (p=.03)	.12 (p=10)
Board members	------	.19 (p-.001)
Parents or local citizen groups	------	------
Teachers	------	-.21 (p=.007)
Central office staff	------	-.15 (p=.04)
Federal agencies	------	.10 (p=.003)
State agencies	------	------
Program director	------	.13 (p=.07)